

The First Three Years: Ways to Promote Your Child's Healthy Development

Overview

Help with understanding the experiences and environment young children need for healthy development, with suggestions about age-appropriate play and appropriate child care.

- Responding to your child
- Creating a stimulating environment
- Play that encourages active learning
- Child care and your child's development
- Helping yourself to help your child

As a parent, you have a vital role to play in helping your baby develop into a strong, healthy, active, and curious child. Researchers now know that the greatest development of the brain takes place in the first three years of life. This development is based on the whole range of experiences that a young child needs -- physical, emotional, language, and learning.

Child development experts have identified the kinds of stimulation linked with healthy development -- and the good news is they are things that you probably do naturally when you take time to focus on your child. They include talking, listening, cuddling, responding to your child's cues and taking advantage of a newborn-to-three-year-old's built-in eagerness to learn.

Responding to your child

When you are attentive and responsive to your child's cues, you stimulate her thinking and learning. These cues can range from an infant's facial expressions to a young toddler's first attempts at spoken words to a three-year-old's spoken demand, "Look at me!" Your response can take many forms: talking with your baby, giving him room and an encouraging smile to try new things, and a warm hug when he is frustrated.

It's important to look for patterns in your child's behavior. What comforts him -- moving into a quieter room? What makes him laugh -- playing peek-a-boo when he is a year old? Pretending a sock is a puppet when he is 2? Notice what experiences catch his interest. Does he like music? Light and shadows? His older brother jumping up and down?

You are responsive to your child when you stop reading a story to answer her questions, or when you pause to give her time to examine a picture. This kind of responsiveness -- allowing for interruption, interaction, and adjustment to your child's needs -- makes reading aloud a stimulating experience. By comparison recent research has shown that watching television for more than an hour a day has a negative effect on active learning for children under 3.

Creating a stimulating environment

Current research on stimulation and healthy development does *not* suggest that parents use flash cards with infants or enroll a toddler in a highly structured

preschool. These kinds of "adult-controlled" experiences don't give children the opportunity for important interaction or the chance to experiment.

Instead, research points to the benefits of singing and talking with babies, reading books, cuddling, and providing opportunities for physical exploration. It also points to the importance of looking for centers and preschools that provide plenty of time for unstructured play and active learning with "open-ended" toys, such as blocks, simple dress-ups, and art materials. These activities promote "child-led" learning and the kind of caring responsiveness on which children thrive.

Play that encourages active learning

Here are some specific ways you can promote your young child's active learning:

- *Hold, hug, and cuddle your baby.* Touching not only comforts and calms your child, but in babies triggers the release of hormones that aid digestion and growth and builds closeness between the two of you. Give your baby opportunities to explore his developing sense of touch by letting him feel different materials, such as sand, fur, and various fabrics.
- *Talk with and read to your child, even at a very young age.* Research shows that exposure to "live" language (instead of sound from television, radio, or recordings) is the single most effective way of stimulating a child's developing brain. Studies show that the more adults talk to babies, the more quickly those children acquire language, and that the effect begins at a very early age. By his first birthday, for example, a child's brain structure is already "wired" to distinguish the sounds of his native language. Research has also shown that the more parents use descriptive statements and questions rather than commands when they talk to their babies and toddlers, the more advanced the children's language will be.
- *Create routines based on your child's natural rhythms.* A regular schedule, with time for naps when he's tired and food when he's hungry, helps create a predictable environment where your child is rested, well nourished, and feels safe. Try to build as much one-on-one time with your child into the routine as you can -- time when you can really pay attention and be responsive. (If you don't have a telephone answering machine you may want to invest in one to free you for concentrated time.)
- *Make your home a safe and interesting place to explore.* If your crawling baby or toddler wants to open drawers and cabinet doors, childproof what you need to and leave a few low drawers and cabinets filled with things that are safe and fun to play with, such as unbreakable containers, things that clatter, and pots to drum.

- *Share your child's interests and show that they're important to you.* Even though your child's developing language may not always enable him to express all of his feelings and thoughts, it is important to follow his lead and talk with him about feelings and experiences. Try to share your 1-year-old's endless fascination with dropping, pushing, and pouring things, and his adventures with learning how to open and close boxes and discover how to put things into containers and take them out again. When your 2-year-old begins to create her own imaginative play with her dolls and toys -- "feeding" them or brushing their hair, offer her some dress-up things or an old baby bottle to use in her play. She will also often welcome the chance to tell you all about her play story. By the age of 3, your child may be excited about exploring the children's room in the library and choosing his own books, or he may become fascinated by the fish tank in a store window. Sharing or supporting these experiences are part of supporting his healthy development. Try not to push your own interests. Let your child set the pace.
- *Leave some room for "down" time.* The notion of the "hurried child" has even come to apply to very young children in recent years. Every child needs some time to simply relax, without a planned or structured activity. Many parents have been made to feel that they are not supporting their child's development unless they have a continual round of planned play activities. In fact, one of the most vital contributions you can make to your child is to protect his opportunities for quiet time. The kind of exploration and curiosity that a child begins to develop needs to be fueled by his own curiosity and energy.
- *Work with your child's personality and temperament.* Curiosity and exploration don't look the same in all children. Your child may be the one who wants to jump with both feet into something new, or he may be a person who needs to take his time to understand what is in front of him before he gets involved. There is no connection between temperament and intelligence or learning ability; help your child to explore in his own way at his own pace.

Child care and your child's development

Having secure attachments to warm and loving adults is crucial in the first few years of life. It helps a child weather the ordinary stresses of life and creates an environment where he can build on daily learning and feel safe to try new experiences. It is only by getting to know a child well that an adult can know how to respond effectively to a child's cues and needs.

Children can form healthy, close attachments to caregivers. What is key is the consistency and caring nature of that relationship. It is important to try to find a child care arrangement in which a loving, attentive caregiver can get to know your child very well over a long period of time.

Try to keep this consistency in mind as you make your child care decisions. How likely is it that the caregiver will move on to something else, leaving you to find a replacement and your child to start over in a new relationship? If you're looking at a child care center, ask about the staff turnover rate and whether the same teachers work with the same children every day.

It is also important to find a caregiver who will interact with your child in warm and responsive ways. This means a caregiver who will get on the floor and crawl with a baby, dance with toddlers, and provide lots of opportunities for loving physical contact, like reading with a child on her lap. Babies who spend most of the day in a crib or in front of a TV won't get the kind of stimulation they need.

Helping yourself to help your child

Years ago a very wise child development expert said, "You cannot pour from an empty cup." She was talking about the fact that in order to give their children the kind of love and stimulation they need, parents have to care for themselves and be cared for by the important people in their lives.

With all of the demands on you as a parent, a spouse, and a worker, it can be very easy to feel overwhelmed, and even guilty. Working mothers in particular often talk about feeling stressed and guilty. It can be very difficult in the midst of all your responsibilities to feel that it is OK to take a break. It is not only OK, it is essential! Try to give yourself at least a few minutes of quiet time or relaxation every day -- maybe in the morning after the baby is fed, or in the evening after she is asleep. At least once a week make a time when you do something that "recharges" you. Take a long walk. Go to a movie with a friend. Go out to eat with your spouse, even if it is just for pizza. Some parents have been known to leave their baby with a relative, friend, or babysitter just so they can take a long nap.

Over time, though, if you continue to feel overwhelmed by your responsibilities, seek help. Talk to a friend; see your doctor; find out whether there are any support groups for parents of young children in your area. Your employee resource program or employee assistance program can help with information and referrals. You will find that you are not the only parent with these feelings.